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The Ancient Land of Living

by Michael Miklinski

(English 1102)

Fourteen thousand years is a large amount of time to grasp and while it is nothing more than a small sliver of time in the scope of total history, there are vast, unimaginable differences between the life and landscapes of then and today. The region known as North America was a completely different landscape; glaciers that measured nearly 3,000 feet high covered much of the land mass. These sheets of ice had formed around 1 million years ago and only started to fully disappear from the landscape 10,000 years ago (Gregory 2). For millions of years on the North American continent, nature had run its course unopposed by humans. Earth had cooled greatly one million years ago and subsequently, went through a major ice age. Nearing the end of this period the glaciers had started to recede which allowed animals and plants that were living in the south to migrate north into these newly reformed lands (Gregory 3). As new land was exposed, different species of both plants and animals started to occupy the same areas of the environment where they formed new food chains. The rapidly changing climate that caused the glaciers to recede had fundamentally altered the landscape which created new, unique ecosystems that would thrive and flourish for thousands of years (Page 21). This untouched, natural state continued for thousands of years until intelligent creatures arose within East Asia and migrated east by way of the Bering Land Bridge around 15,000 B.C. While the earth's water was frozen within the glaciers that covered the Earth, the global sea level at that time was lowered by nearly 350 feet, exposing the continental shelf in a shallow area allowing early humans to enter North America (Morgan 19). The introduction of early humans caused rapid and significant changes to the new, untouched continent when they arrived, writing a new chapter between man and nature, influencing the dynamics of the ecosystems and impacting the landscape.

Early Man that came from the initial migration across the land bridge made a huge impact on the unsuspecting species that lived on the American continent. They “had the stone-point technology to kill the grazing mammoth and browsing mastodon, the ground sloth and long-nosed peccary, huge bison and prehistoric beavers” (Morgan 24). Untouched lands gave precious opportunities for the spread and diversification of the new inhabitants as they took advantage of the ample resources. The Paleo-Indians carried with them thousands of generations of knowledge from their ancestors in Asia which gave them novel skills and the creativity to survive and prosper within an unexplored, harsh environment (Bonnicksen 56). This new group would bring their ancient traditions and knowledge into the new landscape that they explored and would have to adapt to survive in the new wilderness.

The Paleoindians quickly learned that to survive, they had to be opportunistic and take advantage of the natural environment. One group of migrants arrived at an extensive cave in Alabama around 13,000 B.C. which provided for their many needs, such as shelter, a natural spring and an east facing entrance so the sun could warm them in the morning (Morgan 29-30). Paleo-Indians at this time relied heavily on what was available in their environment the same as their ancestors had for thousands of years. From here on the Paleo-Indians would live their lives in this new world with no influence from any other cultures, disconnected from the old lands from which they came. It was here that they developed unique lifestyles to fit their environment; they would eat wild plants, hunt game or catch fish to sustain their small social groups for thousands of years (Morgan 32). A recent discovery near one of these ancient communities had found a naturally mummified carcass of a woman in an underwater cave; “the divers called her Naia... she had been

there for more than 12,000 years, along with the bones of dozens of extinct ice age beasts” (Morin 1). Death was unavoidable for these isolated, fragile lives as they faced the unrelenting, cruel environment of the new world.

The Paleo-Indians had many generations pass by without fundamental changes in their communities which was most likely caused by the overbearing force of nature. From 8,500 to 4,000 B.C. changes were minor within these groups, there was little increase within sizes of their populations and there was little conflict between other groups. They had short lifespans as a result of high disease rates with death from disease far outnumbering deaths due to old age. Skeletons were often found exhibiting signs of tuberculosis, arthritis and birth deformities. This most likely contributed to their limited societal advancement as poor health kept generations short (Morgan 32). Paleo-Indians would soon learn to adapt and utilize resources to their advantage as they sought to expand their communities and their populations started to grow. One major new feature of their villages was the construction of a shaman healing center which would become a highly valuable asset for the struggling communities. We know that they had experimented with early medicinal techniques to treat different ailments. In recent archaeological findings, thirty-five plants found within these healing centers are still in use today (Page 26). With advancements in health care in their societies, an opportunity emerged to control and dominate the once wild and unexpected beast that is mother nature. With improvements in health, they could now advance as the dominant force on the continent.

Paleo-Indians had emerged as the top of the food chain in North America as they managed to fight off diseases, allowing them to take advantage of the land they inhabited. Paleo-Indian communities started to grow and as a consequence these communities had to obtain larger amounts of food to sustain their families. Evidence of bison hunting was apparent as revealed by the discovery of a piece of flint “in perfect contact with a bison rib... proof that Early Man had coexisted with a species of Ice Age bison known to have become extinct by 6000 B.C.” (Morgan 27). These early Paleo-Indians had complete domination over these helpless animals as they cleverly lured and stampeded hundreds of bison off of cliffs where nearly 100 dead bison would sometimes be found, ready to be slaughtered and brought home to feed their growing communities (Morgan 31). These massive hunts would unfortunately have far reaching consequences as some species of bison filled very specific niches within their respective regions. A vital relationship between grazing animals, grass and moss was affected by the mass hunting of the Paleo-Indians where the grazing animals would reduce moss allowing grasses to grow. As the number of bison were reduced, there was more competition between grasses and moss for resources. Also at this time, the global climate was growing warmer as the Earth was leaving the previous ice age giving the moss an advantage. Moss became the dominant species in many regions, reducing the grass which was the food supply for the bison, sending both bison and grass towards mass extinction in certain regions (Bonnicksen 58). With the loss of a critical food supply for the communities, Paleo-Indians were ultimately forced to either adapt or forever be lost to the sands of time as they fought against the powerful force of mother nature once again.

A novel invention came into existence that would save many of these ancient cultures and change history forever; farming had revolutionized the very idea of what a civilization could do and it became the center-point of many new cultures and villages. The psychological change within groups would be very different from the many generations of hunters and foragers before, as farmers did not need to rely on what was merely available in the land anymore, instead taking control into their own hands. Whereas before the forager was thankful for what mother nature offered, the farmer was fundamentally different, as he enjoyed the fruits of his own labor and he took pride in his work. With pride, one would ultimately become territorial to protect his creation. Land became a powerful commodity and this would create great conflict between the growing groups of Paleo-Indians (Morgan 35). Nature was no longer something the Indians had to rely on as they became self

sufficient and could live within much more stationary societies than what was required when they had to follow their sources of food from one location to another. Now they had to rise up and band together within tribes to protect not only their families but the very resources that they depended on to survive. These tribes clashed, yet they would also band together allowing them to build a culture and expand their societies into something that had never been seen before.

Many generations passed, engrossed in the new dominant Native American lifestyle where bigger communities arose as many were able to sustain their tribes in a mostly sedentary lifestyle supplemented by nomadic movements across the continent of North America. Nature was no longer a massive threat that Native Americans had to abide by and new cultures rose to prominence. One prominent tribe that arose around 100 B.C. was the Hopewell which created vast trading routes throughout the continent from their home in the Ohio River Valley to places such as the Rockies and the Gulf Coast. As they traded, they spread their ideas and techniques of mound-building to many different tribes (Keenan 5). These constructions were examples of early advances in scientific understanding as they exhibited their understanding of astronomy at that time. The effigies that they built were expertly designed so they would align with astronomical events allowing them to have an early iteration of an agricultural calendar (Keenan 3). Native Americans would dominate much of the continent for many generations until the arrival of foreign exploration parties from distant civilizations. These eager explorers would find the vast new world a very enticing endeavor and pushed to expand into the area, competing directly with the Native Americans for resources. In their early meetings, they had sought to work together with the natives at first, but things quickly deteriorated as relations with the new explorers became violent. While the natives fought to protect their lands that they had inhabited for thousands of years, it was a losing battle against the far greater, advanced societies that opposed them. The native tribes were greatly reduced and forced onto small reservations as the rise of the United States of America saw the natives as an archaic, uncivilized society that was incompatible with the new country. This would mark the end of the reign of Native Americans, who were the dominant force in the continent for thousands of years.

The environment that was in direct competition with the Paleo-Indians did not fare any better against the new explorers. The settlers had a thirst for control and domination of the landscape as they quickly expanded across the continent to farm and take advantage of the untamed lands. The new inhabitants thrived and grew immensely as they started to quickly amass new power from industry while having no regard for how it may affect the environment. Pollution and resource usage essentially went unregulated for many years as profit and power surpassed the need for a healthy environment. We are only starting to realize as a society the problems that we face in the near future such as climate change due to wild disinterest in our effects on the environment. Just like the Native Americans, we too may be affected by the environment as climate change threatens to pose vast problems such as major changes to habitats and ecosystems which ravage the environment while increased natural disasters such as floods pose risks to developed cities. We have made progress working towards a healthier future as awareness for our global footprint is spreading and we better understand how our lives impact the environment around us. Recent efforts between major superpowers of the world have taken steps in regulating and reducing pollution and unsustainable practices. It is disconcerting however that the very industries these regulations were made to curtail have worked to gain ground in politics and seek to undo the progress that has been made towards a more sustainable society. We need to more than ever be aware of the problems we are creating lest we destroy ourselves as we did the Native Americans.

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